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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5496
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNSOM/SOMALIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUZFAA/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEPADJ/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001674

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/15/2019
TAGS: KPAO KISL KIRF SCUL PROP ET
SUBJECT: WAHABISM IN ETHIOPIA AS "CULTURAL IMPERIALISM"

REF: 08 ADDIS ABABA 3230

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SECOND OF THREE CABLES ON COUNTERING WAHABI INFLUENCE IN
ETHIOPIA

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Arab Wahabi missionaries, mainly from Saudi Arabia, continue to make inroads into the Ethiopian Muslim community, but are meeting increasing resistance in doing so. Islam has existed in Ethiopia since the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the mainly Sufi Muslim community has enjoyed traditions, customs, and cultural practices that have endured for centuries. Yet this indigenous Muslim culture has come under attack since 9/11 by Wahabi missionaries engaging in what amounts to &cultural imperialism8 against Ethiopian Islam. Prior to 9/11, there was little Wahabi proselytizing in Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopia's delicate Muslim/Christian balance and historic attitudes between the faith communities regarding tolerance and mutual respect are being challenged, thereby undermining U.S. interests in the region. Sufi Muslim leaders want support from the U.S. to counter this pressure. END SUMMARY.

WAHABIS CHALLENGE ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS

¶2. (C) In the Harar, Bale, and Dessie regions of Ethiopia, Arab Wahabi missionaries (and their Ethiopian disciples) are directly challenging the traditions and practices of the indigenous Muslim community. As expressed to PAO by members of the IASC, Wahabi missionaries are able to use their money and &legitimacy8 as native speakers of the language of the Koran and their closeness to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, to undermine Ethiopian Muslim customs and traditions and teach interpretations of the Koran that promote a far less tolerant view of other Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Because of the financial support these missionaries have, it is very difficult for Ethiopian Muslim leaders to counter their influence and many imams are not educated well enough to argue against these foreign interlocutors. As a result, indigenous Ethiopian Muslim culture is under assault and the Ethiopian Muslim community needs U.S. support to counter extremist influence that may well generate and promote conflicts with the Ethiopian Christian community as well as intra-Muslim conflicts as we have already seen happen in some areas.

¶3. (C) Ethiopians are sensitive to this issue and readily understand the nature of this conflict when it is put in &cultural imperialism8 terms. &Cultural imperialism8 and &globalization8 are terms that resonate with Africans across the continent. Ethiopian Muslims, in particular, can easily see that Arab cultural imperialism under the guise of Wahabi missionaries threatens their centuries-old faith traditions and sends a message of inferiority to the Muslim faithful. That message of inferiority is that African Muslim traditions (particularly Sufi) are &unislamic,⁸ that Africans who have been practicing Islam for more than a thousand years have &strayed from the Truth,⁸ and that they need to purge their culture and traditions of practices and rituals that do not conform to their Arab/Saudi/Wahabi ideal.

WAHABI ACTIVISM IN ETHIOPIA SINCE 9/11

¶4. (C) Since 9/11, according to post's interlocutors, Wahabi missionaries have increased their activity in Ethiopia greatly. Prior to 9/11, Wahabis were hardly active in Ethiopia. Since that time, though, they have greatly increased their work in Ethiopia, working through NGOs and Ethiopian Muslims who lived and worked or studied in Saudi Arabia and became Wahabis themselves. Early on, they set themselves up in direct competition with the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (IASC) as being the only legitimate Muslim authority in Ethiopia. Although the IASC initially tried to accommodate the Wahabis, they quickly realized there was no compromising with them and cleaned house in the last IASC

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election earlier this year. Now the IASC is all Sufi and they are reaching out to the U.S. and other potential partners to help them counter Wahabi influence.

¶5. (C) In the Bale district of Ethiopia (southeastern Oromiya region near Somalia), in the area around the Sheikh Hussein Shrine, Wahabis destroyed more than thirty Sufi shrines in the first few years after 9/11. In doing so, they turned public opinion against them and met considerable resistance from the local population. No more monuments have been vandalized or destroyed in the past three or four years, but Wahabi activists continue to preach and teach against the practice of saints, shrines and pilgrimages) especially to the Sheikh Hussein Shrine, which has been a pilgrimage destination for Ethiopian Muslims for over 400 years.

¶6. (C) In Dessie, in the Amhara region (northern part of the country), Wahabis are on the offensive against the practice of celebrating Moulid al-Nabi, the Birthday of the Prophet. With support from Kuwaiti religious NGOs, Wahabi activists actively preach and teach against this practice, which has been a popular custom in the larger region for some 200 years.

¶7. (C) In Harar city and the Harar region, Wahabis went to great lengths to make inroads into this historic center of Ethiopian Islam (Muslim since the time of the Prophet and considered by many to be the &Fourth Holy City of Islam⁸), but strong resistance by the populace and their leaders effectively drove them out. In the larger Harar region, Wahabis in the past tried to evangelize the population, but the people in this heavily Sufi area roundly rejected Wahabism to the point that Wahabi missionaries finally gave up and left. This has not been the case in other areas, however, where cultural identity and religious leadership was not as strong and confident as in Harar. Telling people who have been practicing Islam since the time of the Prophet that their traditions and practices are &unislamic⁸ grated heavily on the Hararis, own Ethiopian national pride and ancient faith traditions that long predate those of Ibn Wahab. When driving through this region of Ethiopia, and when walking the streets of Harar and surrounding cities, Wahabi veils and beards are so rare as to be virtually non-existent. In fact, a visitor might go an entire day

without seeing even one.

MAJORITY SUFIS FIGHT BACK AGAINST WAHABIS

¶8. (C) Ethiopian Muslims, by and large, are Sufis. As Sufis, the Muslim communities across Ethiopia have developed local customs and traditions of saints, zikrs (communal prayer chants), and pilgrimages, and Ethiopian Muslim writers have compiled a significant body of literature on Islam, Islamic law, and Muslim spirituality. With the advent of Wahabism in Ethiopia, these practices have come under widespread assault and the indigenous Muslim community has grown increasingly resentful and outspoken in the face of these attacks by foreigners. Muslim leaders as well have grown increasingly bold in their outspokenness against Wahabism and the IASC talks openly now of the need to counter their influence.

WAHABISM AS & CULTURAL IMPERIALISM8

¶9. (C) Given the nature of Wahabi attacks on the Ethiopian Muslim community, the picture is becoming increasingly clear through discussions with Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders that this is, in fact, & cultural imperialism8 by Arab/Wahabi missionaries against Ethiopian/African Muslims. Wahabi missionaries do not seek to convert Christians or non-Muslims, but instead focus all their efforts on other Muslims only. In seeking to & purify Islam8 among the larger Muslim community, Wahabis are in fact trying to develop a globalized version of the Faith that does not reflect the rich diversity of Muslim communities and their faith traditions around the world.

¶10. (C) Ethiopians are acutely aware that they are the oldest independent country in Africa, that they have Africa's only indigenous alphabet, that they were never colonized, that the Falasha Jewish community in Ethiopia pre-dated the Babylonian exile, that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the only

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indigenous Church in Africa, and that Islam has been present in Ethiopia since the Prophet Muhammad himself, among many other points of pride. They are very proud that so many Muslims consider Harar a holy city and that so much Islamic heritage has been preserved there. This national pride is strong across all faith groups and Ethiopians greatly resent foreigners telling them that their faith is wrong, their cultural traditions are somehow wrong and need to be changed, that their centuries-old practices must be curtailed, etc.

¶11. (C) The fact that foreign Wahabi missionaries do not seek to convert non-Muslims, but instead focus exclusively on the indigenous Muslim community, shows that they are in fact trying to change the Muslim culture of Ethiopia by questioning their values (e.g., tolerance of Christians and other non-Muslims, as well as other Muslim groups), their customs (e.g., pilgrimages to saints, shrines), their traditions (e.g., Moulids), their style of dress (e.g., black Wahabi veils that cover the face instead of the open, brightly-colored veils typically worn by Muslim women in Ethiopia), and even the writings of Ethiopian Muslim thinkers whose views do not conform with Wahabi interpretations.

¶12. (C) By recognizing this movement as an aspect of cultural imperialism, it becomes clearer how to develop an effective strategy to counter this influence. Part III of this cable series will outline a range of cultural programs that post is now implementing in Ethiopia that are very well-received by the Muslim community and that show promise to further erode the impact of Wahabi missionaries in Ethiopia.

YAMAMOTO